U.S. Department of Education (ED)
Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools
Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS)

REMS Newsletter – *Barriers to Collaboration*

*"[It was clear that many schools] had no idea about the number of resources that they might consider during a crisis. Schools for the most part are closed systems and have typically only called in 'outsiders' on an as-needed basis. [However, this] mindset is **definitely** changing as threatening events continue to occur locally and nationally. Now schools are willing to make time for collaborations, including involving first-responders and other community resources."* – Gail Reynolds, New Jersey Department of Education

Over the past decade, tragic school shootings, natural disasters, and other threats to school safety have captured national attention. Increased awareness of the vulnerability of schools, students and staff to external events and influences has highlighted the critical need for strong collaboration between schools, first responders, and other community members to successfully manage emergency events. However, strong collaborative relationships do not come naturally. Multiple barriers can impede quick and effective collaboration between schools and community organizations when emergencies arise. Indeed, the fundamental reason for these potential barriers is that emergencies are relatively rare events. They are, by definition, outside of normal, day-to-day procedures and working relationships. Planning for working together under emergency conditions means that collaborating organizations must alter their normal activities, learn about each other, and decide how they will share responsibilities. This newsletter is intended to help schools and community collaborators identify potential barriers that naturally arise when collaborating on emergency preparation, and to propose principles and suggestions for overcoming these barriers.

"Emergency response is not as efficient if responders haven't worked with schools on site planning, or hazard-specific procedures. Collaboration also allows you to better use local, state, and federal funding. For example, our county emergency management group provides National Incident Management System (NIMS) and Incident Command System (ICS) training to school administrators and our school campus emergency response teams (CERT) as well as assist with district plan review and other types of training. Communication efforts also greatly benefit from school district and first responder collaboration." – Althia Scriven, Durham Public Schools (NC)

Many school districts and individual schools across the country have confronted these barriers, and made progress. Drawing on the experience and observations of these school personnel, community collaborators and safety experts on the frontline of emergency management in schools[1], this newsletter describes potential barriers to collaboration and provides strategies to overcome them.

---

[1] The lessons and recommendations in this newsletter, and the many quotes that support them, are drawn from Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) and Emergency Response and Crisis Management (ERCM) grantees, School Safety Center affiliates, and School Security personnel who were invited to describe experiences collaborating with community partners. Ninety former and current grantees and other school and

COMMONLY IDENTIFIED BARRIERS

While each school and community will face its own constellation of barriers and opportunities, similar themes frame their specific challenges. This section summarizes barriers commonly identified by school personnel. The subsequent section identifies potential solutions.

Lack of Resources

One frequently identified barrier to collaboration is a perceived lack of available resources for emergency management. School professionals and other collaborators are constrained by full schedules and tight budgets. The addition of new and often unfamiliar activities can seem infeasible without more resources. For schools, the focus on supporting academic performance appears to leave little time for emergency management planning. Limited available personnel may also prohibit designating specific staff to fulfill emergency management roles. Often, these tasks are added to a professional's already full job description and schedule.

"The biggest barrier is time. Each of these groups has limited time in which to meet and plan, so getting together is always a challenge." – Chris Lopez, Moline Unit School District #40 (IL)

Overall, school personnel perceive resource scarcity in three areas: time for planning, training, and building new community relations; available personnel appropriate to take on responsibility for developing emergency collaboration; and funds to add time, personnel or other resources necessary to the task. In reality, solving these perceived problems requires utilizing existing resources so that time is effectively and productively used, personnel have clearly defined roles commensurate with their jobs, and resources are leveraged across organizations. The section on solutions will provide suggestions for how this can be done.

"Lack of staff resources pertains to collaborators as well. Having staff representation from all agencies assigned to the [planning] group helps create the consistency and continuity [needed to effectively develop a collaborative-based operational plan]." –Beverly Baroni-Yeglic, Ph.D., Southgate Community Schools (MI)

Organizational Differences

"The key to interagency collaboration is 'trust.' Developing opportunities to train together, share issues, and to connect with various individuals helps to bridge differences and dissolve misperceptions of others." – Dr. Larry Nocera, Glastonbury Public Schools (CT)

Schools and first responders each have distinct responsibilities that complement each other in school emergencies, but that foster unique organizational cultures, administrative structures, organizational priorities, and roles. For instance, schools have a continuing responsibility to promote a strong learning environment that pro-

---

safety personnel gave generously of their time and expertise. This strong return reflects the commitment and hard work of these personnel to ensure the safety of students across the nation.

vides quality education services to all students in a safe setting. Promoting academic performance requires a developmental perspective built on careful assessment of student ability and progress, and the flexibility to meet different needs. The responsibilities of first responders require clear lines of authority, anticipation of immediate alternatives, and the ability to make quick decisions. Differences in decision making, authority and other organizational procedures are necessary to facilitate the mission of each organization, but they can become barriers to collaboration between them if they are not clearly understood and coordinated. These differences manifest themselves in specific ways, including differing institutional orientations, different decision-making procedures, and control/"turf" issues.

Institutional Orientations

Schools and first responders approach preparing for, and responding to, an emergency with understandably different responsibilities and orientations. In the event of an emergency, first responders are most concerned with physical safety, securing the site, and medical triage. While schools are also concerned initially with physical safety, their responsibility as the first line of response in a crisis is relieved once first responders take command of the scene. Then, schools turn to a focus on the psychological safety and long-term implications of the event, and the efforts necessary to restore the academic environment to pre-event levels. In short, while both institutional partners are concerned with student safety and site security, first responders approach the emergency situation with this as their primary focus while schools approach emergency planning with an added focus on reestablishing stability and functionality of the school after the event. Understanding and respecting these differences, and providing room for both components during the planning process, is essential to successful collaboration and meeting community needs.

Decision-Making and Procedures

First responders have a clear hierarchical structure aimed towards making quick assessments and rapid decisions. Schools tend to work within the framework of committees and consensus and spend time processing decisions and weighing multiple factors. During a crisis, these different orientations may cause school personnel to feel like the first responders are "coming in and taking over." First responders may perceive that school personnel do not sufficiently appreciate that crisis situations require quick actions with minimal time for consensus and dialogue. First responders are trained to approach their roles and duties with swift precision and to

respond to orders of their supervisor utilizing the Incident Command Structure (ICS) and protocols. Schools have typically developed their own processes for responding to crises and these processes often vary between schools. This may pose a challenge for first responders as they attempt to work with a variety of different school emergency management plans. Understanding these differing orientations is critical to avoiding misperceptions that can interfere with effective collaboration and response.

Incident Command System (ICS)

ICS is a major element of the National Incident Management System (NIMS), established on March 1, 2004 by Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5 (HSPD-5) to guide the management of domestic incidents. NIMS offers a set of concepts, principles, procedures, processes, terminology, and standards that agencies of all different types can utilize in emergency management. There are six integrated components that comprise NIMS: *1)* command and management; *2)* preparedness; *3)* resource management; *4)* communications and infrastructure management; *5)* supporting technologies; and, *6)* ongoing management and maintenance. All Federal, State, tribal, and local levels of government, as well as many private sector and non-governmental organizations use ICS for a broad spectrum of emergencies. When responders from multiple agencies respond to an incident on a school campus, ICS is used to create a clear chain of command, including the transfer of command procedures and lines of communication and efficient management of resources, such as manpower and facilities.

Control/"Turf" Issues

"It is sometimes difficult for school administrators to relinquish their control/authority to a mental health clinician who comes in after a traumatic death and tells the administrator that there should be a particular protocol followed for memorials, or when the police becomes the Incident Commander of an event and school personnel have to follow their directions. The only way to have a coordinated response is to have previous contacts so that expectations are understood well in advance of an event."
– Gail Reynolds, New Jersey Department of Education

Responding to school emergencies involves situations in which school staff and external community partners must make critical—sometimes even life and death—decisions on the school grounds. Schools may be hesitant to share or relinquish control in such situations, particularly if they are unfamiliar with first responders. In turn, first responders may resist decision input from schools, especially if they are unaware of the knowledge base of schools with respect to emergency management. Addressing these issues and facilitating a common understanding in advance of an emergency is paramount to ensuring the safety of students and staff.

System Complexity

Schools and potential community collaborators, including first responders, operate in a complex environment. Communities have differing policies, regulations, boundary issues and spheres of control which often dictate what can and cannot easily be done. All have the potential to impact the collaborative process. The degree to which these factors create barriers, and the associated difficulty of overcoming them, depends on the complexity of the system within which collaboration is undertaken. The larger the number of first responders involved in

the command structure and community partners, the more complexity in the system. System complexity may also be impacted by the context of potential for emergencies, and the nature of those emergencies. For example, communities with the potential for earthquakes must mobilize a response capability that differs from areas where the potential for flood is great; communities with the potential for multiple categories of natural disasters (e.g., tornado, flood) will again differ in the number and nature of priorities in preparedness.

The size of a district also influences the challenges to response. Geographically larger school districts often intersect with multiple first responders and multiple agencies, making coordination more challenging. A school district that has boundaries lying across more than one city or county may interface with the city police department and the county sheriff's department, in addition to multiple fire department districts. This necessitates more time and resources for planning and collaboration and a willingness to utilize a unified command structure.

Smaller or rural districts present different challenges. Often they rely on volunteer-based services which can make coordination difficult due to other primary responsibilities and rotating volunteer schedules. The potential also exists of not having a clear hierarchical structure in place or dual roles complicating the response.

Governance and legal issues can also increase barriers to collaboration. In some states, there are legal mandates for schools to have an emergency management plan and to engage in practice drills. First responders also have similar requirements, but they may be comprised of a different set of written rules, focus, and/or expectations that may not coordinate well with school guidelines. In addition, if one or more agencies have grants or Federal funds, there are typically guidelines as to how those funds can be used, which may divert attention to other areas of emergency planning, such as emergency supplies, rather than collaboration.

Individual agency work schedules can create additional complexity and complication. If collaborative meetings or practice drills need to be held outside regular contracted employee hours, extra funds may be required to cover overtime or provide added compensation. If held during schools hours, coverage for participants' typical job duties may be necessary.

STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME BARRIERS

The experiences learned by real-world school personnel and community collaborators provide recommendations for overcoming the potential barriers that are inherent to collaboration for school emergency prepared-

ness. Specific strategies can help in overcoming each of the barriers presented above. However, when there is a strong commitment to collaboration, opportunities to work effectively together can be found in the diversity and complexity of the emergency management environment. The remainder of this newsletter is organized by the major perspectives that will inform strategies to overcome barriers. Detailed methods and techniques addressing particular issues are addressed in a separate newsletter on collaboration. The following themes are based on the self-reported experiences of school personnel from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools grant recipients.

Developing Shared Understanding

Emergency management planning brings together organizations with potentially very different concepts of the major problems encountered in emergencies, and how to resolve them. Developing a common understanding of emergency management by all stakeholders is a critical early step in collaboration. The National Incident Management System (NIMS), including the Incident Command System (ICS), have been useful in promoting this shared understanding. As Steven McElroy, Director of Security at Columbus (OH) Public Schools, states, "Schools and first responders need to develop an understanding of a common language (Incident Command) which can assist in breaking down barriers between the groups." For example, in an emergency, school staff need to understand the ICS terminology and roles and responsibilities if they are to be active and supportive in the response. Overall, the goal in an emergency is for first responders, school staff and other partners to respond using a common framework through which the participants can see the emergency management incident as a set of activities with its own requirements that are distinct from their day to day responsibilities and that require different operating principles.

A number of procedures used by planning groups to improve understanding across their different organizations were reported by school personnel. For instance:

"In an effort to eliminate barriers with our first responders, I have employed the strategy of "shadowing" a willing police and fire person to get a sense of their job responsibilities. This strategy has served to heighten my understanding of their perspective on their responsibilities to the schools in the districts they serve. It has also served to break down barriers by putting my face on a position to which they are accountable." – David Liss, Marana Unified School District (AZ)

Some planning groups have addressed these organizational differences through use of role plays (early in the planning process) which provide an opportunity for members to productively reflect on their agency and its re-

sponsibilities. Participants specifically cited the importance of shared and interagency training events as a useful vehicle to facilitate increased awareness and better understanding of partner roles.

"We use trainings and seminars presented by the local emergency management office to familiarize our staff with others' responsibilities." – Michael Sterio, Oswego County School District (NY)

Every event or meeting should be viewed as an opportunity to foster greater understanding and awareness about each of the partners and their organizational affiliation.

Finding Resources in the Collaborating System

One of the solutions for the widespread perception of a lack of resources is to facilitate the discussion of potential resources that may exist across the entire network of collaborators. When schools look internally for the ability to meet the training, planning and other needs of emergency planning, the tasks may appear overwhelming. However, a key purpose of collaboration is to leverage available resources that may be present within a community.

For example, schools are one of many community settings for which first responders have a responsibility to provide emergency coverage. Broad mandates from the Department of Homeland Security require first responders to enhance and train community response personnel and prepare for a wide variety of crises (e.g., pandemics). Therefore, first responders bring resources in addition to their expertise in response to specific crises. They can benefit and support schools through cross-training and participation in drills and exercises with school staff.

Schools also have their own resources that help facilitate the collaboration and networking process. Specifically, they can offer facilities for holding meetings with community partners, they can conduct larger meetings drawing in the broader community, and they can provide forums for disseminating preparedness information to families of students. However, a major challenge for schools is in scheduling such trainings. Time can be a particularly important consideration in scheduling training events or full-scale exercises. As Fred Ellis, Director of School Safety in Fairfax County, Virginia stated, "While we collaborate extensively on plan development, communication and terminology, it is difficult to find time in the academic calendar to accommodate exercises that involve the use of an entire facility". While time for meetings and other collaborative activities (e.g., train-

ings) is a scarce resource, strategies can be used to foster productive multi-agency collaborative planning efforts.

1. There must be a perceived value in getting together. Asking individuals to take time out of their schedule and work life can be accomplished so long as the individual perceives a greater value or good to emerge from participation in the event. Many school representatives indicated that school staff were burdened with detailed and extensive 'meeting' obligations. However, when made aware that first responders would be in attendance at their planning meeting, school personnel found 'time' to participate in these events.

2. Manage meetings or events professionally. No one wants to attend meetings that are disorganized (e.g., lacking an agenda), unnecessarily long, or that minimize opportunities for input or lack a formal decision-making structure. Unclear roles and responsibilities combined with poor agenda setting and a lack of follow through contribute to the belief that the meetings are wasteful and unproductive. Good time management, prior agreements on the agenda, clearly stated meeting objectives and a timeline providing a framework for all partnership activities underscore the importance of the meetings and help encourage continued participation.

3. Minimize use of meetings. Being careful in structuring the number of meetings is an important consideration. Too many meetings, independent of how well-structured and managed they are, will generally work against group interest. It is also important to pace the level of meetings to the needs of the overall planning effort. Generally, more meetings are required initially; then they taper off. Holding meetings for the sake of a schedule developed earlier in the process has the potential to negatively affect ongoing participation. While getting on everyone's calendar is important, convening meetings without substance will certainly result in early departures in the collaborative planning process. Meetings must be perceived as relevant to *all* of the parties. Rotating meeting sites represents another way to engage and provide ownership to the partners.

Fiscal Resources

Funding is seen as an underlying barrier to all emergency planning efforts. For example, schools do not typically receive funding explicitly to conduct emergency management activities, and this barrier often applies to community partners as well. When a perspective on shared resources is clearly developed, funding for new activities becomes less of a concern. Indeed, successful collaboration makes it clear that new resources for

individual agencies are less the issue than knowing about and creating opportunities for collaborators to use their existing resources to carry out their responsibilities (e.g., in the school setting).

Indeed, once effective collaboration is underway, it can help expand funding for the collaboration itself, rather than for individual agencies within it. Several school representatives indicated that establishing the collaborative planning process actually resulted in securing funds for emergency management activities. Other school representatives indicated the importance of conducting trainings and drills, in conjunction with scheduled first responder events.

> *"With respect to limited funding resources, we have relied on the police, fire department and local emergency management office to provide training gratis."* – Roddie Miller, Omaha Public Schools (NE)

To summarize, funding is not needed to create a relationship with first responders and other partners; however, funds may be needed for other items such as training and equipment. Limited time and monetary resources can make joint training and drills a challenge, but the identification of joint funding sources (i.e., state level grants, government sources, etc.) or businesses willing to donate or provide supplies for a reduced cost can help to meet the common goals and lead to innovative use of funds.

Turning Organizational Differences into Assets

> *"We deal with many different first responders from multiple agencies. Not every agency takes the time to find out the needs of schools that are inside their district."* – Bob Spears, Los Angeles Unified School District (CA)

There are a number of 'barriers' that relate directly to organizational differences between first responders, schools and other stakeholders. Each of these barriers stems from the differences in organizations based on varying decision and procedural needs that directly link to their respective successes in their distinct missions. These differences are appropriate, and they are the basis for making collaborative work more effective than fragmented activities by different organizations. When schools and community partners work collaboratively to establish an overarching understanding of their shared mission related to emergency management, they can begin to use their different expertise productively. The problem becomes not who is in control, but who should have primary responsibility in specific emergency situations, how partners mutually decide when that situation exists, and how partners communicate and support each other in that emergency situation.

Identifying work groups that can develop specific emergency management protocols is a key component of effective collaboration. Larger meetings and trainings are important for building the framework of understand-

ing, but working together in work groups that resolve the details of collaborative activity builds the trust and mutual benefit that strengthens and sustains collaboration.

> *"Ongoing collaborative works allow for the development of relationships.* [It provides] *a working surface in which to gain trust and an understanding of the various organizational activities."* – Lisa Andrew-Miller, Hillsboro School District (OR)

As the following statement by one school planner makes clear, effective collaboration requires commitment to the network at the top of organizations, but collaboration becomes most real and lasting when it extends down into organizations where effective work groups are forged.

> *"A lack of awareness of the hierarchies and administrative layers of each organization – the concept and philosophy of collaboration — must be authorized by the highest level of each agency's administration, but the tasks or collaboration often need to be delegated and it's important to have the right fit of equivalent functions that match the task. There can be cultural barriers too, in the sense that educators are accustomed to committees and consensus, but first responders' imprints are for quick assessments and rapid decisions."* – Gina Kahn, Hampden-Wilbraham Regional School District (MA)

SUMMARY

Collaboration is a process of using diversity in organizational mission and expertise to solve shared problems that require these capacities to be combined. It is natural that newly collaborating organizations and individuals will perceive these differences as barriers. This newsletter addresses the important revision in this natural point of view that is central to making collaboration succeed. Developing a shared perspective, and developing procedure that is focused and respects the responsibilities that agencies already have, is a critical initial step in adopting this new perspective. Seeing the resources of others as complements to each organization's capability, and organizing the diversity in procedure and capacity among collaborators to meet the diverse needs of emergency management, is the essence of the collaboration process. This newsletter encourages this broad perspective that will help to overcome perceived barriers and will help facilitate ways to transform them into assets.

RESOURCES

There is a small but growing literature focused on collaborative processes on emergency management for schools. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) offers a series of publications on mitigation planning that includes an extensive discussion on community partnerships and collaborations. The Hamilton Fish Institute on School and Community Violence and the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory under contract to the U.S. Department of Justice published a series on community responses for safer schools that is

also relevant. The Department of Education's Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center has two newsletters on the topic. Lastly, local Chambers of Commerce offices may have up-to-date listings and contact information for local affiliates of national organizations that should be present in a collaborative.

State and Local Mitigation Planning: A How-To Guide. "Getting Started – Building Support for Mitigation Planning." Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Publication 386-1. September 2002. (Available Online) www.fema.gov/plan/mitplanning/howto3.shtm

Adleman, H. and L. Taylor. Effective Strategies for Creating Safer Schools and Communities. "Fostering School Family and Community Involvement." US Department of Justice. Published by the Hamilton Fish Institute or School and Community Violence and Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. September 2007. (Available online) www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/book7.pdf

"Tapping into Non-Traditional Community Partners for Emergency Management." ERCM Express. Volume 3, Issue 1. 2007. (Available online) http://rems.ed.gov/views/documents/TapIn2CmunityPartnrs4ERMgmt.pdf

"Engaging Administrators in School Emergency Management." ERCM Express. Volume 2, Issue 5. 2007. (Available online) http://rems.ed.gov/views/documents/HH_Vol2Issue5.pdf

"Practical Information on Crisis Planning – A Guide for Schools and Communities." US Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools. (Available online) www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/emergencyplan/crisisplanning.pdf